
Statement

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

*Speaking notes for The Honourable Hedy Fry, P.C.,
M.P.*

*Secretary of State (Multiculturalism) (Status of
Women)*

*On the occasion of the UN World Conference Against
Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and
Related Intolerance*

Durban, South Africa

September 1, 2001

Madame President, Ministers, Excellencies, mesdames et messieurs, senors y senores – good evening.

On behalf of Canada, I want to thank the government and the people of South Africa for the dedication and hard work that went into putting together this important and timely meeting - and for the warm hospitality of the people of Durban.

It is fitting that such a historic conference should be held here in South Africa, not only in memory of the bitter but heroic struggle of its people to rid themselves of the virulent legacy of apartheid – but also in tribute to a remarkable new democracy. A democracy rooted in the belief that diverse peoples can, through truth, forgiveness and reconciliation leave behind a tormented past and achieve, respect and peace.

I can think of no greater aspiration or inspiration than that. Surely this is why we have all come here – to build such a world for all our children.

Canadians are proud that we are today a bilingual, multicultural nation, whose diverse people enjoy a remarkable level of prosperity, tolerance and social cohesion, sharing common values of compassion and fairness. Nevertheless Canadians would acknowledge that our history has not always been one of inclusion and respect.

For a long time the Aboriginal peoples of Canada faced displacement and assimilation, which eroded their social, economic and governance structures. We recognize that this has had a long term effect on Aboriginal peoples.

Many immigrants came to Canada to escape discrimination, marginalisation and exclusion. Others faced these challenges on arrival. Perhaps it is because of their experiences, the mistakes we made and the lessons we have learned, that Canadians

developed a strong vision of a just, tolerant and accommodating society – a vision that has begun to be realized in our time.

This vision has led us to take our own path – to create a mosaic that honours and respects the diversity of our citizens. Our approach has been that equality cannot be achieved by treating everyone the same. For us, equality can only be achieved through specific and appropriate solutions that address the barriers faced by individuals and groups: barriers created by discrimination based on race, language, ethnicity, religion, gender, disability and sexual orientation.

As a result, Canada's framework for equality is rooted in our Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This document entrenches in our constitution a fundamental recognition of the equality of individuals. It forms the backdrop for legislation such as the Canadian Human Rights Act, and the Multiculturalism and Employment Equity Acts. However, we have learned in Canada that legislation does not necessarily guarantee change. It must be supplemented by programs and policies that make it possible for all Canadians to participate in the social, political, economic and cultural life of our country. Those programs and policies must be developed in partnership with civil society.

In preparation for this conference, we consulted broadly with civil society to understand the scope of racism and discrimination in Canada and develop the responses required. We consulted with youth, women, communities, NGOs and indigenous peoples. We heard of their experiences of subtle and not so subtle racism and discrimination often because of multiple factors such as race, religion, ethnicity, language, gender, colour, disability, sexual orientation, and social or economic status.

We also heard that multiple grounds of discrimination compound racism, and particularly affect those communities

who identify themselves within a unique, complex interplay of religion, ethnicity and other factors.

Issues affecting aboriginal peoples were a particular focus of the consultations. And while the quality of life in Aboriginal communities is improving we remain concerned that living conditions are still well below those of other Canadians. The Government is committed to working with Aboriginal peoples as they strive to build a better future for themselves and their communities. We recognize this commitment extends to a range of issues from resolving land claims to addressing housing and health issues, to strengthening self-sufficiency and economic development.

Canada's relationship with Aboriginal peoples will continue to evolve, to respond to changing realities. We cannot afford to remain entrenched in old ways of thinking, but rather, we must be guided by a mutual desire to see Aboriginal peoples share fully in the social, and economic opportunities of Canadian society.

We also heard that visible minorities, in particular African Canadians, still face barriers to full participation in the economic life of Canada. Problems with acceptance of foreign credentials by certain trades and professions may constitute a compounding factor.

We realize that although Canada today has achieved remarkable success as a tolerant and inclusive society, we still have work to do to achieve our goals – of a diverse and democratic society - a society that can and must move beyond tolerance to respect. This is the challenge that we face as Canadians.

Madame Chair, our presence at this World Conference is proof of our willingness to work with our fellow member states to combat racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related

intolerance. This conference is a beginning – but it would be tragic if it should lose its way.

Bitterness and anger, blame and recrimination narrow our vision and blind us to the greater goal, which is to leave our children a legacy of hope.

This Conference is an opportunity for national and global introspection. This conference is an opportunity to develop effective, appropriate, universal strategies to eradicate root causes of conflict. We are here – because we believe that dialogue is the key to understanding – and understanding is the first step to finding common ground that will lead to mutual respect and peaceful co-existence.

We heard from Canadians that they want the outcomes of this conference to be forward looking, action orientated and dedicated to developing practical effective strategies to combat racism.

Madame Chair, there are many common issues on which we all can agree. We know that new technology, emerging patterns of migration and global trade are changing the way people interact.

In particular, new communications technologies such as the internet are being used to promote hatred. Our challenge is to eradicate messages of hate while preserving the fundamental right to freedom of expression and freedom of association.

As well, globalization is having a profound effect on how we relate to one another. It could help us to understand each other better or divide us further. The choice is ours.

Developing concrete, forward looking measures to address all of these issues will take cooperation and partnership. We the governments of the world cannot do it alone. We need the strength and wisdom of civil society to guide us so we can

understand the reality of their lives and to find effective solutions to our common problems.

Youth are a key component of civil society. They view racism through a different lens. I heard earlier this week at the youth summit that Governments need to stop speaking to youth and start listening to them. They are the ones on the front lines of the struggle against discrimination. They live and breathe the challenges that people from our generation have still not been able to solve. Governments need to recognize the rightful place of youth in the dialogue so that we – together across generations – will be able to tackle these difficult issues.

Madame Chair, let us resolve to move beyond exclusion to inclusion, beyond blame to reconciliation. – beyond singling out any one nation and acknowledging that human rights abuses and discrimination plague us all.

To allow any one issue to dominate at the expense of all others is to silence the voice of the many who are here to testify to their suffering. And it sidelines the UN at the very moment when the disaffected are counting on it most.

And let me emphasize, that this Conference will not meet its crucial goals if we allow the current situation in the Middle East to monopolize our discussions. It is clear that the parties themselves must take the necessary steps to regain the impetus towards a negotiated peace. This conference must avoid, and Canada will not endorse, any language that does not serve this basic objective.

Madame Chair, slavery is a pernicious form of racism. Past or present it is morally repugnant and an indelible stain on the fabric of history. Tragically, it is still being practised today.

This conference challenges us to promote the values that unite us rather than divide us – to search for our common humanity as

peoples of a rainbow world. To acknowledge the past, but not be prisoner to it. To recognize that our present and our future are ours to make.

Let us, as leaders, accept our responsibilities. Let us leave to our children a legacy of freedom - not oppression. Of openness - not prejudice. Of generosity, tolerance and respect for one another.

Madame Chair, as we meet here in the country of Nelson Mandela, the province of Chief Luthuli and the City of Mahatma Gandhi, let us re-dedicate ourselves to the vision they defended so valiantly – the vision of peace, dignity and reconciliation. Let this, not division, be the legacy of Durban.